

On Spiritual Formation

No formation without regeneration.

"My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you . . ." Paul, Galatians 4:19, NASB

Within evangelical movement, especially on the part of the emerging church, we hear a lot of talk about "spiritual formation." [1] The difference I have with the spiritual formation movement is not regarding the destination—Paul wrote that Christians need to grow-up **"to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ"** (Ephesians 4:13)—but over the journey, how emerging evangelicals are proposing we get there. As the Holy Spirit incorporates Christ within and among believers, He sets Christ-likeness as the objective for every believer because that is the very meaning of the name, "Christian."

The problem with so many evangelicals today is that they are not Christ-like. [2] Three decades of "pop worship," with its emphasis upon entertainment at the expense of edification from God's Word, has led to spiritual-emptiness. "Happy church" has not made for a holy church, and the deficiency has provided a spiritual climate in which spiritual directors, spiritual formation, and spiritual disciplines have emerged. As evangelicals experientially embrace the mystery of faith in our postmodern era, emphasis upon spiritual formation is becoming the vogue in churches, Christian universities, Bible colleges and seminaries.

Recently, I listened to a pastor explain to his congregation why they were not an emerging church. [3] In his conversation—they no longer call it preaching—he referenced Paul's statement in Galatians 4:19 to justify employing methods of spiritual formation. The text reads: **"My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is *formed* in you . . . for I am perplexed about you"** (Italics mine, Galatians 4:19-20). Connect the dots—*formed . . . formation*. On this basis, the pastor assumed Paul to have been a kind of spiritual director who promoted spiritual disciplines to affect spiritual formation. The pastor's assumption caused me to look at the biblical text to see whether Paul was promoting such an approach to spirituality. Ironically, what I discovered was opposite from what this pastor inferred the text to say. But first some background . . .

The Gospel is good news, not good advice. But for years now, for reason of the promotion and proliferation of the formulaic self-help message by publishers and pastors who took their cue from Norman Peale and Robert Schuller, another gospel has mesmerized and seduced evangelicals. [4] This seduction is not unlike the threat the Judaizers posed to the Galatians. Theirs too was a legalistic self-help message masquerading as a new gospel. But this other gospel deceived the Galatians. Let's review some similarities between then and now.

First, the Galatians had been **"bewitched"** by a different gospel (Galatians 3:1, KJV). From the beginning to the end of the letter, Paul called them back to grace. At the outset, he wrote, **"I am**

amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6; Read verses 6-9). The Judaizers had convinced the Galatians that law (self-help), not grace, was the means by which they could be saved and sanctified (i.e., to become like Jesus). This reversion back to law was serious, for as Bruce commented, “if they put themselves under the law, then they are not justified by faith in Christ and Christ is not ‘in them’ . . .” [5] Whatever else might be understood about the statement—*until Christ be formed in you*—the epistolary context is one in which “another gospel” had “bewitched” the Galatians thereby causing them to fall away from the Gospel of Grace and embrace a message of human ability and methods of self-help (Galatians 5:4). For this reason, *Christ would not be formed in them*. In fact, under this circumstance, *Christ could not be formed in them*.

Second, in another epistle, Paul described his relationship with the Thessalonians to be as that of a “nursing mother” and an “imploring father” (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11). Though in this Galatians context he calls them “my children,” Paul pictures himself as once again being in labor (i.e., in the pains of childbirth) over them for reason of their spiritual defection. Burton remarked: “The reactionary step which the Galatians are in danger of taking, forces upon the apostle the painful repetition of that process by which he first brought them into the world of faith in Christ . . .” [6] In Paul’s view, this was a spiritual life and death struggle for the churches of that region. Personally, he felt deep agony of soul over their spiritual condition. By conning the churches of Galatia into believing a different gospel and as the virus of the self-help message spread throughout the region, the false teachers had aborted the Gospel of God’s Grace. The spiritual life of those congregations was being extinguished. For reason that *Christ was not formed in them*, the apostle found himself again in labor pains over their spirituality, or lack thereof. Longenecker notes that the expression, “points to the need of returning to basics, repeating, as it were, the Galatians’ conversion to Christ.” [7] I would clarify that those Galatians that had joined up with the Judaizers did not need spiritual formation. They needed spiritual regeneration, something that no spiritual discipline practiced *below* could induce. New birth can only come from the sovereign Spirit *above* (See John 3:3-9.).

Third, the verb “is formed” suggests Paul understood that he was limited in what he could and could not do for those who had lapsed from grace. The verb (*is formed*) is passive, not active. If perchance the Galatians were to turn back to the teaching of grace, it would have to be for reason of the sovereign God’s working in their hearts. [8] The final outcome of the law-versus-grace struggle was beyond Paul’s power. He could not control what was going on in their souls. Had he stated, *My children, I am in great labor again until I form Christ in you*, then he might have been writing about spiritual formation as contemporarily understood. But he did not, and approaching spirituality through the legalisms of disciplines would have resembled the very Judaizing methods Paul repudiated! So he chided the Galatians, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3; Compare Colossians 2:23.). No spiritual discipline could turn the tide of the battle so that Christ would be formed in them. If that was to happen, God would have to do it. From Paul’s perspective, the outcome was uncertain and indefinite. No legalistic techniques or disciplines would cause Christ to be formed in them. Nevertheless, the apostle would agonize over them until Christ might be born-formed in them.

Fourth, what did Paul mean by the phrase, *until Christ is formed in you*? By his use of the verb

“formed” (Greek, *morpho*), was the apostle referring to spiritual formation or regeneration? In other letters, Paul speaks of believers being “conformed to” or “formed with” Christ (Greek, *summorphos*, Romans 8:29 and “fashioned,” Philippians 3:21), and of believers being “transformed” (Greek, *metamorpho*, Romans 12:2). Paul does not say that he was in labor so that the Galatians would be conformed to Christ. Rather, he states that the Galatians were unformed.

So, what are we to conclude? Does Galatians 4:19 support the idea that the Apostle was advocating the practice of self-help disciplines to achieve spiritual formation? Such methods would have resembled those the Judaizers employed. Legalism always carries the idea about that spirituality can be formed. But spirituality must be born before it can be formed (See Romans 8:9.).

Because, as their embrace of the legalisms (i.e., spiritual self-help formulae) demonstrated, the Galatians had deserted the teaching of grace to embrace another gospel. Paul appears unconvinced that they had ever been truly born in Christ. Thus in his letter to them, the apostle explains in vivid metaphorical language that he was experiencing the pains of childbirth with them hoping that they would be born in Christ so that they could be conformed to Christ. For how could the Galatians have become spiritually formed without having been spiritually born. Paul was in agony of heart over their need for spiritual regeneration. As Bruce observed: “It is not that Paul sees two stages in Christian experience—being justified by faith and having Christ formed within one—it is rather that the one implies the other and reliance on the law for salvation negates both.” [9]

As self-esteem and self-help teaching morphed the gospel in the preceding generation, the current emphasis upon spiritual disciplines as affective of human spirituality appears to be but a variation of the kind of legalistic approach to spirituality promoted by the Judaizers.

The Chinese have a saying: *There's no use trying to carve rotten wood*. Only people originally born in Christ are capable of being formed in Christ. Yet researchers have observed that between contemporary born-again and non-born-again there is no behavioral and moral difference in their lifestyles.[10] If the behavior of those within evangelicalism gives any indication, then what is needed is not spiritual formation, but spiritual regeneration! And that appears to be what Paul meant when he wrote to the defecting Galatians, “**I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.**”

ENDNOTES

[1] “Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's spirit, for the transformation of the world.” See “Small Group Experience in Spiritual Formation,” *Companions in Christ, A Ministry of Upper Room*, (http://www.upperroom.org/companions/tipsarchive.asp?act=details&loc_id=2974&item_id=203312).

[2] See Pastor Larry DeBruyn, “No Fear,” November 11, 2009, *Guarding His Flock Ministries* (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2009/11/18/no-fear/>).

[3] Mike Erre, “Position Papers: Is ROCKHARBOR Becoming an Emerging Church?,” (<http://w>

ww.rockharbor.org:80/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=79&Itemid=109).

[4] Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "Bewitched! The Evil Eye Over Evangelicalism," *Herescope*, March 29, 2010 (<http://herescope.blogspot.com/2010/03/bewitched.html>)

[5] F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983): 213.

[6] E. deW. Burton cited by Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians: Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 41 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1990): 195. One Greek dictionary adds, "The address in Gal 4:19 is intended metaphorically for children for whom Paul is once more undergoing the pains of childbirth." Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, Translators, Revised by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979): 808.

[7] Longenecker, *Galatians*, 195.

[8] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996). Wallace notes the passive can be used "when God is the obvious agent" (p. 437). The subjunctive mood denotes a potential outcome contingent from "the time of the main verb," which in this instance is, "I labor." (p. 479).

[9] Bruce, *Galatians*, 213.

[10] DeBruyn, "No Fear."